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ABSTRACT

This Digest guides the elementary teacher in choosing accurate and appropriate works of fiction for teaching about Japan. It suggests important content to watch for and includes a checklist of questions to be used when selecting a book. The questions deal with literary qualities, accuracy, authenticity, stereotyping, language, and morals. Contains an annotated list of six recommended titles. (KCM)

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by Mary Hammond Bernson

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Fiction About Japan in the Elementary Curriculum

Mary Hammond Bernson

For many children, their first view of Japan comes from story books. Those books can entice, delight, inspire further study, and offer glimpses of a world previously unknown. They can foster open-mindedness and an awareness of other ways of thinking and living. For these reasons, selecting accurate and appropriate books has become a primary responsibility of teachers.

The Challenge of Choice. Elementary teachers, often without any formal training about Japan, must make decisions about book purchases that will have a potentially life-long impact on students' attitudes. Choosing books that can meet this challenge has taken on new complexity and significance due to trends both within elementary education and in the world beyond the classroom door. In classrooms across the country, fiction is often the main source of children's information about Japan. Since both pedagogical innovations and inadequate school budgets have contributed to a decrease in the use of elementary school textbooks, teachers must consider the historical accuracy of the books they choose. Innovations such as the whole language approach to reading, new methods of assessing student learning, the encouragement of diverse and multicultural perspectives, the application of theories of multiple intelligences, and the integration of teaching across the curriculum often mean that a student in the primary grades hears a folk tale from another country, does an art activity based on that culture, uses the metric system in the art project, finds out a bit about the flora and fauna now living there, and writes a letter to an imaginary pen-pal. This kind of integration across the curriculum puts a teacher's choices of fiction at the crossroads of the whole curriculum.

Embedded in this integrated curriculum is the teaching of citizenship. Elementary teachers regularly wrestle with citizenship issues, including the relationship of the individual to the group. Many school districts teach citizenship to children who speak a variety of languages and dialects. A book choice can send either the message that "those kids" come from a weird place, or that those kids have a heritage about which we should know more. Books can stimulate empathy, compassion, and a search for solutions to problems we all face. They can teach us that contacts with others generate both conflict and cooperation. Books of fiction provide a safe place to explore life's troubling issues.

Guide to Selection. Many sources of book recommendations are readily available, including rosters of winners of prestigious awards and the list of "Notable Children's Trade Books" produced annually since 1972 by the National Council for the Social Studies and the Children's Book Council. Reflecting the trend toward using fiction to teach or reinforce content in the social studies, the list now includes annotations about the social studies themes to which each book most closely pertains. The committee evaluates over 200 books each year, selecting only those that meet the highest standards of quality and accuracy in both text and illustration. Teachers can also make informed choices; the following list of questions can serve to guide teachers as they evaluate books for selection:

- Is the book compelling and powerful? Adults expect books to be of high literary quality, or to be a "good read," and children deserve these qualities, too.
- Is the book a folk tale, a retelling of a folk tale, an "original" tale set in ancient times, or something else altogether? You may want to use any of these. Just be aware of what you have. Try to make connections between the past and the contemporary world. Select supplementary materials that reinforce the message that those whose stories took place long ago and far away have descendants about whom we should learn.
- Does the book allow Japanese characters to speak for themselves, or is every voice American? Does the book avoid the assumption that Japanese and Japanese-Americans speak with one voice?
- Is the book accurate? This is a particularly difficult aspect for busy teachers to research, but it is extremely important.
- What claims are made for the book by those who write the dust jacket or the publicity materials? Many "authentic tales" are full of eccentric projections of the fertile imaginations of American authors.
- Is the book free of misconceptions and stereotypes? In addition, if it is one of the few books children will ever see about a country, does it contribute to a broad understanding of that country?

Mary Hammond Bernson is the Associate Director of the East Asia Center at the University of Washington. She has directed six travel-study programs for K-12 educators, and is the co-editor of *Teaching About Japan: Lessons and Resources*. She has published an article in *Education About Asia* that treats broadly the use of fiction in teaching about other peoples and cultures. See the Spring 1997 issue, pages 37-39.

- Is the language well-chosen, well-written, standard English? Some translated materials, as well as some original stories, create false exoticism by word choice, such as using the term "master" when talking about a teacher, instead of simply "Mr." or "Ms."

- On a continuum from exotic to blandly homogenized, where does the book fall? Does it emphasize atypical aspects of a country which are most different from the United States? Or does it err in the other direction, treating all peoples and their cultures as being "just like us?" Pictures often reinforce the extremes, ranging from scary depictions of Asians amidst gratuitous exotic details to series in which all people are painted in the same round-eyed dreamy style, with a generic universal skin tone which looks as if it were chosen by committee.

- Does the book avoid the pitfalls of equating "western" with "modern?" Does it avoid the assumption that traditions are something others have, something that they will give up when they "progress" toward being just like us?

- If the book conveys a moral, is it appropriate to the culture in which the story is set? Think twice about using a book about a little girl, set in long-ago Japan, which conveys a contemporary American self-esteem message in the best tradition of the little engine that could. "I think I can; I think I can" would not have made that little girl a government official. Books that set contemporary American values in Asian settings lead students to assume that everyone shares those values.

Some Favorite Titles. No one book can excel in every way, but the eclectic list below includes personal favorites that lend themselves to effective classroom use.

Grandpa's Town by Takaaki Nomura. Translated by Amanda Mayer Stinchecum. Brooklyn: Kane/Miller Book Publishers, 1991. This bilingual book, illustrated by the author, follows a young Japanese boy from the city as he visits the town where his grandfather lives.

Grandfather's Journey by Allen Say. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1993. In pictures and prose, this book reflects the emigration of the author's grandfather from Japan to the U.S., and then his return to Japan.

The Loyal Cat retold by Lensey Namioka and illustrated by Aki Sogabe. San Diego: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1995. In this book, papercut illustrations embellish a Japanese folk tale with a moral to convey.

The Master Puppeteer by Katherine Paterson. New York: Harper Collins, 1989. This is a novel about an apprentice puppeteer swept up in a tumultuous event in Tokugawa-era Osaka.

The Moon Princess retold by Ralph F. McCarthy and illustrated by Kancho Oda. Tokyo: Kodansha International, 1993. This is an ancient Japanese story with illustrations first published more than 50 years ago.

Sadako by Eleanor Coerr and illustrated by Ed Young. New York: The Putnam Publishing Group, 1997. This version of the favorite story of the thousand paper cranes is especially for young readers.

References and ERIC Resources. The following list of resources includes references used to prepare this Digest. The items followed by an ED number are available in microfiche and/or paper copies from the ERIC Document Reproduction Service (EDRS). For information about prices, contact EDRS, 7420 Fullerton Road, Suite 110, Springfield, Virginia 22153-2852; telephone numbers are (703)440-1400 and (800)443-3742. Entries followed by an EJ number, annotated monthly in CURRENT INDEX TO JOURNALS IN EDUCATION (CIJE), are not available through EDRS. However, they can be located in the journal section of most larger libraries by using the information provided or requested through Interlibrary Loan.

"1996 Notable Children's Trade Books in the Field of Social Studies." SOCIAL EDUCATION 60, no. 4 (April/May 1996): 1-16. Updated annually, an annotated bibliography keyed to social studies themes. EJ 530 101

Bernson, Mary Hammond and Linda S. Wojtan, eds. TEACHING ABOUT JAPAN: LESSONS AND RESOURCES. Bloomington, IN: Social Studies Development Center, 1996. A collection of K-12 lesson plans and a guide to resources on Japan. ED 401 223

COOPERATION IN JAPAN. Stanford, CA: Stanford Program on International and Cross-Cultural Education (SPICE), 1990. A teaching unit that demonstrates how fiction, in this case a Japanese children's story, can be used to teach an important concept about a country.

Gluck, Carol and Others. JAPAN IN A WORLD CULTURES SOCIAL STUDIES CURRICULUM: A GUIDE FOR TEACHERS. New York: Columbia University East Asian Institute, 1989. A curriculum unit designed for ninth grade and based on a unit of 15-20 class periods focusing on six themes. A timeline, maps, and a list of audio-visual materials are included. ED 332 937

KAMISHIBAI FOR KIDS. A bilingual collection of Japanese stories, traditional and contemporary, presented on over-sized picture cards for group viewing. Each story comes with a teacher's guide. P.O. Box 20069 Park West Station, New York, NY 10025-1510. Tel. 212-662-5836.

RABBIT IN THE MOON: FOLKTALES FROM CHINA AND JAPAN. Stanford, CA: SPICE, 1979. This is a collection of folk tales and guidance for the teacher concerning ways to use the stories to deepen students' understanding. ED 399 207

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